

Socratic sleights-of-hand in Plato's *Republic*

John Dillon

Plato's famous *Republic*, a dialogue between Socrates and a number of interlocutors, is one of the central works in the history of philosophy. But in fact Plato lets Socrates get away unchallenged with numerous tendentious arguments.

Near the beginning of book 6 of Plato's *Republic*, Socrates' interlocutor Adeimantus makes the apposite remark:

No one, Socrates, would be able to challenge these statements of yours. But all the same, those who hear you on each occasion argue in this way come away with the following feeling: they think that, owing to their inexperience in the game of question and answer, they are at every question led astray a little by the argument, and when these bits are accumulated, at the conclusion of the discussion mighty is their fall and the apparent contradiction of what they said at first.

He goes on to compare the experience to playing draughts with an expert. Interestingly, Plato allows Adeimantus to make this criticism of the Socratic method, but he does not require Socrates to reply to it. Nor, I think, has it been replied to even yet. Despite the intensive analysis to which Plato's *Republic* has been subjected, little attention has been paid to the tendentious nature of certain of the basic moves which Socrates makes in his argument for seeking the true nature of justice in the individual by looking at it at the level of the state.

The analogy between state and individual

Let us begin with the basic assumption made by Socrates in book 2, which launches the whole enquiry. That is the assumption that, if we agree that justice can be attributed both to an individual and to a city, then the nature of it must be the same in both. Now this is so persuasive a proposition for a Greek, especially one that had fallen under the influence of Socrates, that it hardly counts as sleight-of-hand, but it is nonetheless an assumption that can reasonably be challenged.

The main difference, in ordinary speech, is precisely the one that Plato wishes to obscure from us for his own purposes. That is that, while to describe a man as 'just' in ordinary parlance is to refer to his relations to *others* – that is, that he tells the truth, keeps his oaths, pays every man his due, or whatever – in the case of a city or a society, 'just' is every bit as likely to mean 'fair and equitable in its *internal* arrangements', that is, in relation to itself. A state may certainly be regarded as just in its relations to other states, but when one speaks of striving for a 'just society', for example, one means primarily fairness in internal relations, between rich and poor, workers and employers, male and female, young and old, and so on. When we go, therefore, in obedience to Socrates' suggestion, to search for justice as projected onto the 'big screen' of the *polis*, what we are going to find is precisely something to do with *internal* relations – and that is of course what Plato wants to establish for the 'small screen' of the individual.

The principle of specialization

However, even this concession, readily granted by Adeimantus and Glaucon, is not going to get him where he wants to be, as we shall see. Various further moves are needed. The next one arises at the very outset of the setting up of the state, though its full significance is not sprung on us till somewhat later. We agree readily enough, at the outset, that civil society comes into being because none of us is 'self-sufficient'. It is better, therefore, in the sense of being *more efficient*, that one man should do one job, whether that be making shoes, growing vegetables, building houses, or herding sheep. Elsewhere, we are persuaded to agree to the fairly uncontroversial proposition that different people have different natural aptitudes, and so would naturally tend towards the tasks to

which they are best fitted. All that is implied is that, if people try to do more than one task, or even aim at total self-sufficiency, they will live less efficiently; and if they get stuck in a job to which they are not naturally suited (e.g. a tinker or a tailor who would rather be a sailor), they will be restless and unhappy.

As long as we are describing the state in its most basic form, this 'Principle of Specialization' remains at this essentially descriptive, and non-prescriptive, level. But when Socrates turns to consider his 'fevered' version of the *polis*, the principle suddenly becomes *prescriptive*, with the implication that it always had been. He says: 'But did we not *prevent* the cobbler from becoming simultaneously either a farmer or a weaver or a builder, but *compelled* him to be a cobbler, in order that we would have his work as a cobbler done well, and in the same way to each of the others we assigned one task, to which each was fitted by nature'. Once introduced this language of prescription turns out to be essential for the next move that is to be made, namely the creation of a professional standing army *cum* police force. But it is precisely with this creation of a standing army that we cease to be in the position of describing the growth of actual states, and move to the postulation of an *ideal* state, based on this very principle of specialization, now granted the status of an absolute law.

At no stage does Glaucon or Adeimantus protest that our original enterprise has now been undermined in such a way as to make the whole comparison with the individual invalid, since the idea was to look at the state as it actually is, or at least some variety of actual state – and *not* some hypothetical, ideal state – in order to see where justice might be found in it, and so in the individual. No actual Greek state ever had a standing professional army (Sparta is no exception – there the whole male citizen body constituted the army; there was no standing army distinct from the citizen body). Glaucon is certainly initially surprised at this development (he protests: 'What? Would they themselves [sc. the citizens] not be enough?'), but he is easily quelled by being 'reminded' of the Principle of

Specialization in its new, prescriptive form.

We find ourselves, thus, with a new class of citizen, such as never existed in reality in the Greek world (except possibly in the Pythagorean-run states of Southern Italy in their heyday; but even if we accept that, it is disingenuous, to say the least, of Plato to introduce these without any warning as 'normal' Greek states), and Plato is enabled on this basis to advance rapidly in the direction that he wishes to go. Even so, however, he needs a few more conceptual sleights-of-hand before he can complete his construction.

From two classes to three

The next interesting move comes straight away, when Socrates proposes to 'choose out which and which sort of natures will be suitable for the guarding of the state'. Up to this point there had been no talk of any process of selection, or of education and training. Here, however, it is assumed, without demur from Glaucon, that positive measures are to be taken, and further, that there are special natures which will be suitable for this role, prior to all training.

How are they to be selected? Plato has a chance to tell us, but instead he passes on directly to the long and famous discussion of how they are to be educated, once they have been selected. The problem comes back in an acute form a little later, where the question is raised for the first time as to who among the guardian class shall be the actual rulers of the state, and who shall simply have the role of law-enforcement and protection from external aggression. Socrates begins with the reasonable proposal that the older should be the rulers, and the younger the ruled. So far so good, but this does not yet get him where he needs to be. For the truth is that another generic division in the state is about to be unveiled, and a simple division between older and younger guardians is not going to be adequate to establish this. So Socrates proposes another distinction, at first sight a fairly innocent one: 'And it's plain also that the best of them should rule?' Glaucon agrees to this without hesitation, but it emerges very quickly that this search for the best – or more specifically, the 'most capable of guarding the city' – is going to require a further selection process. This process, as described, is really very odd, because it sets out to test, starting from childhood, which of these guardians are most – or least – subject to backsliding and dereliction of duty under the influence of either pleasure or fear. Now such as fail this test, one would have thought, would be manifestly unsuitable to the role of law enforcer (which is the role that the new class that emerges from this testing procedure, the 'assistants', is to fill), and should rather be demoted to the

ranks of the artisans – or simply done away with, in the tactful way that failed entities in Plato's state are normally disposed of. In fact, however, such inadequate persons are deemed suitable to continue in this new subordinate role.

This, then, is the final sleight-of-hand which Plato practises upon us in the process of setting up his political system. He needs, not a two-way, but a three-way class division of the state. In the famous 'Noble Lie', these become the Gold, Silver, and Base-Metal classes, i.e. the successful guardians, the unsuccessful guardians, and the artisans. Why did Plato choose to set up his final division between the classes in this curious way? He could, after all, have argued that ruling and administration is a distinct calling, just like the military calling, and should have people assigned to it exclusively, following the Principle of Specialization. Why he did not choose to take this route I must confess I cannot say. It does indeed correspond to age-old Indo-European usage – though Plato, admittedly, cannot have known that. Perhaps he thought that deriving his rulers from the original military class would seem more natural and less shocking to Greek sensibilities – but then, as I have protested already, there is nothing normal or natural, in a Greek context, about the postulation of a professional standing army, and this procedure seems to lay him open to the criticisms that I have made of it.

John Dillon taught at Trinity College, Dublin until his retirement. He dedicates this article to the memory of his tutor at Oriel College, Oxford, Richard Robinson, who lectured regularly on Plato, but also argued with him incessantly.